

GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ARTIST ANALYSIS

ARCHIVE PROJECT

ARTIST NAME: Delphine Diallo

Heritage, debt, culture, identity

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Delphine Diallo, "highness", digital photography, 2015, <http://www.delphinediallo.com/highness>

This short art analysis paper accompanies an original video presentation produced by UTC undergraduate students, dedicated to the work of a contemporary artist and developed as part of ART 4190r: Global Contemporary Art course in Spring 2021.

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April 28th, 2021

Contemporary Art

Artist Analysis Archive Paper

Delphine Diallo is a Brooklyn based visual artist and photographer. She has French and Senegalese heritage, inspiring the way in which she approaches her artwork. She attended the Academie Charpentier School of Visual Arts in Paris and initially started working in a music industry related field associated with graphic design and video production post college. After this era of her artistic career, she moved to New York City to pursue her love for photography and storytelling through the lens. It wasn't until Diallo met Peter Beard that her career as a photographer began to jump start. Peter Beard who is most well known for his wildlife photography saw Diallo's potential as a photographer and acted as her mentor. She ended up meeting comedian Chris Rock and was given the opportunity to work with him on the total blackout tour. She also was able to collaborate with artist Shepard Fairey on his "We the People" posters that later became quite popular, gaining Diallo an audience. Diallo's transition to NYC really allowed her to gain valuable experiences and connections that will boost her platform as an artist.

Diallo's photographic work commonly explores themes related to anthropology, martial arts, mythology, religion, as well as science.¹ She would routinely assign herself a weekly targeted task for shooting in order to gain knowledge and experience in the field of art she was

¹ Holly Stuart Hughes. "Behind the Lens: Delphine Diallo for Essence." *Photo District News (Online)* (2019).

trying to become very strong in. She drifted towards the field of portrait photography, having been exposed to skills relating to anatomy from her mother at a young age that enhanced her understanding of portraiture and the human form. She describes her mother as a “great painter and artist”, being responsible for inspiring her daughter to pursue a creative related field. Diallo believes in studying multiple different subjects in order to further your understanding of photography as well as of her subjects. Diallo uses woman subjects within her work. Unlike most photographers, Diallo allows random woman subjects to come into her Brooklyn studio in order to have their portrait taken. She focuses on bringing more beauty into the photograph by highlighting the model’s craft and individuality. This unique process allows her photographs to be visual representations of multiple different people coming together for the purpose of collaboration.²

“Highness” is one of Diallo’s first projects in which she collaborated with sculptor Tresse Agoche in order to photograph models wearing these stunning headpieces.³ Diallo states, “My vision is nothing without the athletes of other strong women.” describing the artist’s creative process in which she loves to collaborate with other African American women artists within her photos. In “Highness” Delphine Diallo, Sculptor Tresse Agoche, Fashion Designer Dynasty Presh, as well as Jewelry Designer Soull Ogun, work together in order to create Diallo’s vision for the piece. The subject within this piece can be shown being veiled with an African Mask but yet still containing aspects of the Victorian era. When initially viewing this piece, you might question

² *Portrait Photography with Delphine Diallo: ZEISS Full Exposure Ep.14. YouTube*, 2019. <https://youtu.be/YJxduomluHM>.

³ “Delphine Diallo.” Delphine Diallo - 16 Artworks, Bio & Shows on Artsy. Accessed April 28, 2021. <https://www.artsy.net/artist/delphine-diallo>.

if this work deals with ideas relating to heritage or culture but after we learn more about Diallo's beliefs, we begin to see these collections of images as something other than that. "People always ask what you are as an identity and I think in the next twenty years we're going to talk about identity completely different. We judge or we separate or we put into a box it doesn't help us in order to bring the collective together more and the collective has nothing to do with only your cultural identity it has to be beyond that somehow you know?"⁴ Her ideas relating to identity and unity are unlike many of the readings we've discussed in class. "Heritage and Debt" by David Joselit would disagree with her artistic intentions, holding her accountable for expressing the complex relation between African Art and Western understanding. She chooses to neglect any association of her work relating to identity and culture as they allow for her work to inspire disunity. Diallo might agree that work produced with Joselit's ideas in mind would call for the opposite of unity which is what she's working against. The use of various African iconography within her work makes her art become derivative or "origin specific" as described by Joselit. The whole idea of paying debt to non-western cultures seems to be quite comparative, something Diallo tends to describe as negative. Diallo's ideas relating to heritage are actually quite similar to that of Eurocentric groups, believing that the ideas are a thing of the past and should be used to draw inspiration from, rather than used to create work that is only fully understood by a relating group of individuals with similar cultural heritage as the artist. This being said, Diallo deals with this idea without "debt" in a way that uses her own personal culture and heritage in order to depict themes she personally identifies with.⁵

⁴ *Portrait Photography with Delphine Diallo: ZEISS Full Exposure Ep.14. YouTube*, 2019. <https://youtu.be/YJxduomluHM>.

⁵ Joselit, David. "Heritage and Debt." *October* 171 (2020): 139–141.

“Woman of New York” is a series that Diallo created that allows you to get a glimpse of the unique feminine subjectivity that originates within the city. The women's rights movements at this time inspired Diallo to act upon this collective identity and create work by collaboration with others around her that had similar beliefs and stories. Homi K. Bhabha encourages people to look at culture and heritage as a complex equation, acknowledging the negative traumas that have contributed to the present day understanding of culture/heritage but in a way that doesn't only focus on the negative aspects. In a way the women's march/movement is an example of marching to acknowledge the inequalities we as women still experience but focusing on the progress in which we've made. Every woman she photographs is a subject of their life and Diallo's job as a photographer is to bring their “best life” to them. Diallo hopes to create a relationship with women that negates judgements and opinions and rather focuses on feeling accepted as well as being valued for your individuality and everything you bring to the table both good and bad. Diallo is inspirational in the sense that she holds herself accountable for shooting, choosing to go about this project in a way in which she shoots 15 women a day regardless of how much effort this is. She photographs with honesty in her mind which is why she selects models in the way she does. In the past, Diallo has hand picked her subjects which she describes as still being a part of an “unconscious sort of discrimination” limiting her work as an unbiased ethical artist that considers others within her artistic process. She loves opening her studio door and allowing the women that want to participate within her art to get the chance to. Diallo finds it way more powerful to shoot subjects that willingly wish to share and open their heart to her, as opposed to models that she would hand select based on physical aspects. These subjects will be more honored by capturing their photos since they appreciate the artist's work. She photographs these

subjects with the hopes of achieving a collective oneness/conciousness in all of the woman's visions in which she shoots. "The location of culture" by Homi K. Bhabha describes a way of looking at culture that focuses on the differences rather than similarities which is something that Diallo does quite the opposite of within her photographic practice. She depicts culture and heritage within a shared view, allowing her subjects ideas and opinions to become equal powers within this series. This way of creating work becomes reflective of a shared communal whole which becomes very successful and relatable to all types of women which is what the artist strives for.⁶

⁶ "Theories and Methodologies: On Homi Bhabha's Location of Culture [Special Section]." *PMLA : Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 132, no. 1 (2017): 135–.

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